

Nikolai Andreevich Rimsky-Korsakov

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Born: March 06, 1844 in Tikhvin, Russia

Died: June 21, 1908 in St. Petersburg, Russia

Nationality: Russian

Occupation: Composer

Nikolai Andreevich Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908), composer, conductor, and pedagogue, was a member of the Russian "Mighty Five." He was largely responsible for establishing the rigor and uncompromising professionalism of the Russian school of the turn of the century.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov was born in the town of Tikhvin near Novgorod on March 6, 1844. His father had served prominently in the provincial government, and, although the boy showed an early musical talent, he was duly entered in the St. Petersburg Naval Academy at the age of 12. While there he took violoncello lessons and later piano lessons from Feodor Kanille (Théodore Canillé), who encouraged his efforts at composition.

About 1861 Kanille introduced the young cadet to the circle of talented dilettantes who depended on Mili Balakirev for professional advice and guidance. This "Balakirev Circle" sought a Russian-based expression on the model of Mikhail Glinka. Its prominent members--Balakirev, Rimsky-Korsakov, Aleksandr Borodin, Modest Mussorgsky, and César Cui, became what the critic Vladimir Stasov much later called the "Mighty Handful" or "Mighty Five."

From 1862 through 1865 Rimsky-Korsakov cruised around the world with the Russian navy. His First Symphony, composed during this trip, was performed upon his return by Balakirev, who conducted the orchestra of the Free Music School, which he had founded.

Rimsky-Korsakov now devoted less time to navy affairs. He composed the symphonic poem *Sadko* (1867), returning to the theme much later for an opera, and the Second (*Antar*) Symphony (1868). In 1871 he became a professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, and in 1873 he resigned his naval commission. From 1874 to 1881 he directed the Free School, and he served as director of navy bands until 1884. He became convinced of the need for professional training, professional mastery, and a professional attitude. He embarked on a thorough study of harmony, counterpoint, and especially orchestration and urged a similar course on his colleagues. He published a harmony text in 1884 and an orchestration text in 1896. He displayed his orchestral expertise in his Third Symphony (1874) and in the delightful tone poems *Capriccio español* (1887), *Scheherazade* (1888), and *Dubinushka* (1905). But most of his energy went into his operas, the most important of which are *Snow Maiden* (1882), *Sadko* (1898), *The Invisible City of Kitezh* (1907), and *The Golden Cockerel* (1909). The sources for these and other works were fairy stories, Eastern tales, and Russian folk epics.

During the political unrest of 1905 Rimsky-Korsakov vigorously protested police repression of the students. The conservatory was closed down and he was dismissed. Others, including Alexander Glazunov, resigned in protest. The conservatory eventually reopened on a more autonomous basis with Glazunov as director and Rimsky-Korsakov as head of the department of orchestration.

The orchestral color and the beguiling, if not authentic, "orientalisms" of Rimsky-Korsakov's work brought him considerable fame and popularity. He was by far the most prolific of the Five, with a long list of orchestral works, 15 operas, and a substantial amount of chamber and vocal music. Moreover, his major works were divisible with no great musical loss into small sections which could be put to utility concert and "background" use. Perhaps no less a contribution was his effort on the behalf of others' music: he finished, rewrote, and orchestrated many works of other Russian composers, including Alexander Dargomyzhsky's *Stone Guest*, Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina* and *Boris Godunov*, and (with Glazunov) Borodin's *Prince Igor*.

Rimsky-Korsakov died on June 21, 1908. His establishment of professional mastery of technique as the exclusive route to musical legitimacy is a legacy still preserved in Russia.

Further Readings

- Rimsky-Korsakov's own *My Musical Life* (1909; trans. 1924; new ed. 1942) is basic. M. D. Calvocoressi and Gerald Abraham devote a chapter to Rimsky-Korsakov in their *Masters of Russian Music* (1936). Essentially the same chapter was published by Abraham as *Rimsky-Korsakov: A Short Biography* (1945). Any music history, especially an account of the romantic era, will contain a section on Rimsky-Korsakov. The most recent reference is Mikhail Zetlin, *The Five*, translated and edited by George Panin (1959).
- Abraham, Gerald, *Rimsky-Korsakov: a short biography*, New York: AMS Press, 1976.
- *Reminiscences of Rimsky-Korsakov*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- Montagu-Nathan, M. (Montagu), *Rimsky-Korsakov*, New York: AMS Press, 1976.
- *My musical life*, London: Ernst Eulenberg Ltd, 1974.

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